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ABSTRACT

At Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City about a dozen teachers teach English composition in a special room (N779): 25 computers along the 4 walls frame the large arena in the center which holds several work tables, each one surrounded by 6 chairs. The room is an eco-system designed for learning about text production. The most exciting, least-common denominator that can be extracted from the writings of people like Ann Berthoff, James Britton, Ken Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and James Moffett seems to be that the best teaching is that which teaches the least. The most obvious practical application of this abstract idea was encouraging the students to do peer collaboration or "group work." Each group decides whether to first write their stories or arguments on the computer or to collaborate at their table. Each student is usually working on several essays and has to decide which one to revise or complete that particular day. Students in N779 chiefly learn--in a relatively safe environment--to practice taking risks that all successful writers must do. With the new room space design, collaboration is spontaneous. Although the students say they dislike writing, they act as if they like it, and although the teacher has transferred much authority to the student groups, he or she now has more control than ever. (RAE)

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Merging Computer-Writing & Collaborative Learning:
The Role of Space in Room N779

At Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City about a dozen of us teach English composition in a special room that I find sublime: twenty-five computers along the four walls frame the large arena in the center which holds several work tables, each one surrounded by six chairs. As I ambulate, I often feel as if the monitors are keeping a friendly eye on what's going on at the tables. This lively room, N779--really an eco-system designed for learning about text production--reminds me of the way I visualize a traditional craft shop: apprentices bustle about in their creative tasks almost as if choreographed in moving among group formations, machines, and pairings, intermittently pausing in tableaux while conferring about their scripts-in-progress with peers or master. The music is a mix of human murmur with counterpointing keyboard clatter and printer buzz. The only other decor is a flower pot in the window.

What strikes outsiders who peek into N779 is of course the computers, tools which are absent from normal classrooms. Yet for me they are merely the icing on the cake. How we acquired this space with its furnishings I'll explain in a moment; first I want to relate my adventures as a journeyman in the trade, the story of what brought me into this unorthodox space and enabled me to function in it.

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It had taken me a long time to learn that nobody likes to talk to the back of other people's heads while stiffly seated in military formation; that people of all ages learn more from collaborating in small groups in a lab or studio setting than from listening to a talking head in a lecture hall; that word processing (so popular now in the non-school world) is a rewarding option in English composition courses; and--in all--that arrangement of space is crucial to sound pedagogy. This command of space is ultimately the responsibility of the person in charge of instruction. And that person is me, not the dean of administration or the state governor. The buck stops on my desk.

Yet, giving up my desk was actually the first of many steps that I began taking about a decade ago on my way toward redesigning space in my classrooms. What propelled me toward this drastic change was plain old burn-out or self-doubts. My students did not seem to write better at the end of our Intensive Writing course than at the start. I had become so frustrated that I rewrote my resumé with an eye toward a career change--publishing, business, anything. Then as a last straw I took a look at some books and articles in an emerging field of inquiry variously called "Composition" (with a capital C) or more grandly "rhetoric and composition theory."

Since my doctoral training in comparative literature had excluded work in this field, I was amazed to look out over this new rich space, as if I were standing on a peak in Darien. The most exciting, least-common denominator that I extracted from the writings of people like Ann Berthoff, James Britton, Ken Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and especially James Moffett seemed to be, roughly, the best teaching is that which teaches the least. This difficult

notion came as something of a spiritual jolt for an old take-charge person like me, used to having things my way, in and out of the classroom: I felt relief and hope.

The most obvious practical application of this abstract idea was to have the students do peer collaboration or "group work." The first time I tried groups brought great misery. They flopped. When in the middle of the term I asked the students to get up and move their chairs to form small groups, no one budged. I prodded. No movement. The following week I tried again. And gave up. Today I understand what happened. I had tried to change horses in mid-stream. The students had already been conditioned to my old ways, to my having reduced the activity of writing to a collection of dismembered gestures of a dead ritual in which I authoritatively deposited facts into passively resistant recipients, seated in subordinate formation.

Then the miracle: not knowing for certain what had possessed me, I did the opposite of what would seem to be called for. I remember thinking that if I kept doing what I had been doing I would keep getting what I had been getting. And that was unacceptable. So instead of sharpening control and discipline, I gave up my desk and moved in among the students, breaking down their lines of defense against engagement, and sat in a different spot every session. It was certainly an act of a desperate man. But it did the trick. The ensuing disorientation then became the topic for an essay assignment. From then on it has been mostly uphill, rewarding but arduous. The next semester, in 1980, I held my first successful class of small collaborative groups. I simply began the course, the very first day of classes, with chairs already placed in small circles of six, and then proceeded to act

as if I had been using groups all my working life. The students bought it and it changed my career--though not in the way I had feared: I was now able to remain a teacher. And the W.A.T. scores (evaluations of the university-administered Writing Assessment Test) improved about 50%. Above all, motivation increased. Ever since that time, I have transferred much of my authority in the room to the group spirit of my students.

Through collaboration with some of my own peers, who also sought liberatory strategies, I learned how to help my students experiment in various ways with working in editorial writing-shops. One strategy that resulted in a flowering of creative efforts was the publishing of a class magazine. As soon as I had proposed the idea, the ball was in their court, and I became a consultant on the sidelines, happily watching the new game. I felt sure somebody in power would stop my experimental, free-wheeling ways in the classroom, but it didn't happen, though some of my colleagues were concerned. "How can we keep control if students are allowed to mill about?" was a common question. My cryptic response that "less control means more control" predictably had little impact. Others suggested that I was repeating the mistakes of the 60s, using those laissez-faire methods which, according to what Alan Bloom is saying now several years later, had caused the very illiteracy that we are trying to repair.

Indeed, the causes and cures of inadequate literacy became my next stumbling block--or stepping stone--on my journey to Room N779. Though I have no doubt that the best preparation for writing is talking about one's writing, most students if left on their own would do all talking and little writing. When I noticed that many students were unable to utter an accurate reading of

their own writing, I made my next big step one of focusing on texts, with a reduction of time spent in class on oral discourse. The chief impetus for this path was my realization that the recent partial return to (preliterate) oral communication in our culture, resulting from technological inventions like broadcasting and recording equipment, has distracted numerous people--especially the younger generation--from texts. I see this especially in my basic writing classes: after handing out written instructions or assignments to my groups, individual students often come and ask me to tell them what I wrote in the handout. It's not that they don't know how to read, it's that they'd rather not, even after several semesters in college. So I see one of the functions of the writing room to encourage interaction with texts, whether on paper or on screens. I have therefore institutionalized my discourse with the groups in a weekly newsletter-like "Bulletin," containing mostly data and assignments that would traditionally be offered in lecture form. Similarly, every session each group has to give me a report detailing what the members accomplished during the session. This report is in writing, too. Interesting reports are published in the Bulletin.

Further, for years I had been doing what my own teachers did to us in college: on Fridays I assigned a chapter in the textbook. On Mondays I explained what they had read. The students of course quickly realized that there's no point in reading something before it's explained and that it's just as pointless to bother reading it after it has been explained and discussed. Thus it seemed reasonable to discard this method and instead have the students explain the assigned reading, first in writing, and next

in oral discourse among themselves at their group tables. This type of discussion, now standard procedure, is based on their reading aloud to each other their written summaries of the home work. Reading and writing become intertwined in joint practice. Qui scribit bis legit (Those who write, read twice).

The daily Bulletin also serves well in modelling writing, not so much that the students should learn from the style of my writing as from the fact of it, from their observing me as a human being who finds the frequent practice of writing a natural, useful activity. Students learn far more powerfully from what they see--what we as teachers model for them--than from what we say, another reason why I now seldom lecture. If students leave college thinking that writing is boring, difficult, and irrelevant, then that is exactly what they have been taught. Students learn what we demonstrate. Just as I wouldn't consult a doctor whose office plants are dying, I don't think my students would be inspired by a writing teacher who doesn't write.

Next, my own productivity as a writer leapt into outer space, it seemed, when I bought a small Kaypro computer in 1984. I was slow in catching on to its potential role in pedagogy, but my colleague Dr. H. Lee Gershuny was far-sighted enough to form a one-person computer committee in the English department. When I returned to earth after writing a book on my new Kaypro, I joined her committee (which today is about half a dozen strong), and in 1985 the two of us persuaded the BMCC administration to let some of us in the English department experiment with computer-writing courses. The first couple of years we were allowed to spend part of the class time in a computer lab. This worked well, but as faculty demand for computer time grew, restrictions were placed

on our use of this lab which was intended for general student use. Eventually the problem of our overstaying our welcome in the public lab brought a splendid solution when our department was awarded a grant to purchase computers.

I have delayed talking about the computers in N779 until now, after reviewing some of my prior classroom adventures, because I don't think the electronic gadgets make sense outside the context of the rhetorical/pedagogical ideas and strategies I have described. But the computers played a decisive political role in the re-formation of Room N779: it was this machinery that enabled us to appropriate the space in the first place. Since the old N779 was the largest room in the department and a favorite of many faculty, there was some resistance to putting computers in it, so I hardly dared dream of it, but fortuitously its very size made the room more suitable to hold the extra equipment. I played only a small role in lobbying for this development, and ultimately the grant application, the purchase of the equipment, and the redesignation of N779 as a "computer-dedicated classroom" required the good works of the whole computer committee, the college space committee, the English department chair, Dr. Rivkah Feldman, and at least four deans, especially Dr. Sandra Poster.

One of the great coups of our computer committee upon entering our new space was obtaining tables and real chairs--the normal chairs meant for sitting--instead of the usual one-armed contraptions, referred to as "strait-jackets" by students. Our other decision which made N779 the great space for learning to write that I judge it to be was placing the machines on the edges of the room and not in the usual straight rows in the middle of the room.

Since the new N779 opened for business in the spring of 1988, I teach in the early morning. The first thing we do, after booting the IBM MS/2 Model 60 and loading my new Bulletin file to the hard disk, is to water the philodendrum plant in the window. Unless it's a cloudy day we also draw the shades since the morning sun rising over the Greenwhich Street roof tops is strong and could blind the monitors. Then the students retrieve the Bulletin from the file server and put it up on their private screen; now they have a choice of taking notes from it or printing it out for later reading. They have many other choices: each group decides whether to first write their stories or arguments on the computer or to collaborate at their table. Each student is usually working on several essays and will have to decide which one to revise or complete that particular day. They are strong on initiative, and I need to intervene in their work less and less. Often I see pairs of students splendidly teaching each other in front of their monitors--or at their tables. As they smile audibly, I recall how dreadful it used to be to listen to silent students. Their interaction promotes a daring trial-and-error approach that I seldom saw before. Like the turtles, who make progress only when they stick their necks out, my students in N779 chiefly learn--in a relatively safe environment--to practice taking the risks that all successful writers must do. Once the room space has been designed, it seems collaboration is spontaneous.

As for my own role, I usually act as a reader of drafts or finished pieces of writing. Sometimes I read screens, sometimes penned drafts, and sometimes print-outs in various stages. Unless I've been asked to join a group to help the members with a problem, I spend most of the class time in conference with one stu-

dent at a time. But I'm more than a tutor; I'm the master of the room, though I keep a low profile. Once in a while the devil gets into me and I clap my hands and ask for everybody's attention. Perhaps I have perceived some kind of emergency, perhaps I have a sudden yen for that attention that my students give each other. But this happens infrequently now. Instead I jot down urgent messages for inclusion in the next Bulletin. For N779 is a space system set up for comfortable text production, an arena where my acting as a barker is unwelcome.

I like the symbolism in the computers' not being in the center of the space but in the periphery. This puts them nicely in their place, as does the following digressio, describing my most successful strategy: one ingredient in preparing the students in the BMCC Intensive Writing course (which concludes with the City University of New York W.A.T.) is a series of practice W.A.T.s, (simulated CUNY finals). Each of these practice tests is scored not only by me but, first, by the students themselves. In the beginning I train them by explaining the criteria for evaluation and doing some "norming," just like the faculty when marking the real W.A.T.s. The students quickly get the hang of it, and though they may not be very accurate in their scoring the first few times, there's no task in the whole course that is undertaken with greater seriousness and enthusiasm. Picture this: a group of some twenty people, most of whom have shamelessly boasted of hating reading and writing, are sitting there around their tables in N779 for the better part of an hour, vigorously examining essay after essay, obviously sweating it out with their consciences in trying to arrive at an equitable score for their peers--finally protesting they're not finished when I announce

that class is over. This is abnormal behavior.

This is indeed a room of paradoxes. Although BMCC inventories N779 as a "computer-dedicated classroom," its best showing in my classes unfolds without the use of computers. Although the students say they dislike writing, they act as if they like writing. And although I have transferred much of my authority to the student groups, I now have more control than ever. But I see little mystery here because in the end, the engine that drives the discourse in N779 is not the electronics along the walls, but the human spirit on center stage. Yet the computers often play a strong synaptic role in electrifying that spirit, so I feel truly grateful that because these machines demanded their own space, we received Room N779.

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